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## Kwame Alexander to Start His Own Imprint. The Name? Versify. Get it?

By ALEXANDRA ALTER JAN. 30, 2018



As a child, Kwame Alexander was surrounded by books. Now he'll have his own imprint at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Books for Young Readers. Edmund D. Fountain for The New York Times

In 2012, Kwame Alexander was struggling to sell “The Crossover,” a hip-hop inflected novel in verse about twin brothers who are stars of their junior high school basketball team. Twenty-two publishers had rejected it. Most said there was no

market for a poetry-infused, sports-themed children's book, because boys wouldn't read poetry, and girls wouldn't read about sports.

Undeterred, Mr. Alexander was planning to self-publish it, when Houghton Mifflin Harcourt made him an offer. "[The Crossover](#)" became an instant critical and commercial hit. It won the prestigious Newbery Medal in 2015, and has sold nearly 500,000 hardcover and e-book copies, cementing Mr. Alexander's reputation as one of the country's most innovative children's book authors.

Now, [Mr. Alexander](#) is poised to have an even bigger impact on contemporary children's literature. Next spring, he will begin publishing books under his own imprint, Versify, at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Books for Young Readers, and he's looking for risky, unconventional books like "The Crossover," he says.

"My inclination is going to be to find books that other people might not view as feasible or doable," he said during an interview at his publisher's office. "I feel like I'm the guy to do that."

The first batch of books from Versify reflects Mr. Alexander's eclectic taste and broad ambitions. The inaugural spring 2019 list includes Kip Wilson's "White Rose," a young adult Holocaust novel written in verse, which tells the true story of the Nazi resistance leader Sophie Scholl; "Vamos!/Let's Go!" the first in a new bilingual picture book series by the illustrator Raul Gonzalez, who publishes as Raul the Third; "This Is For Us," a picture book featuring a poem by Mr. Alexander that looks at African-American history through the lens of sports and culture, with illustrations by Kadir Nelson, and Lamar Giles' "The Last Last-Day-of-Summer," a middle grade fantasy novel about two cousins in Virginia who accidentally freeze time, inspired partly by Norton Juster's "The Phantom Tollbooth."

Mr. Alexander said he's especially interested in books that incorporate poetry, as well as works in translation. "Verse is a really great way to tell emotionally heavy stories," he said.

Making a big bet on poetry might seem counterintuitive, but it could prove commercially savvy. Novels in verse have become a surprisingly vibrant and popular literary form with young readers. The best-selling author Ellen Hopkins publishes young adult novels in verse that tackle controversial issues like drug addiction, suicide and teen pregnancy. [Jacqueline Woodson's](#) memoir in free verse, "Brown



Kwame Alexander, the author of “The Crossover” and other popular books for young people, at a book signing event at the Lafayette Public Library in Lafayette, La.

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“Girl Dreaming,” won the National Book Award for Young People’s Literature in 2014, and became a best-seller.

Ms. Woodson, who is a friend of Mr. Alexander’s, said she expects that he will discover new voices that might have otherwise gone overlooked by the publishing industry.

“He’s going to challenge us as readers,” she said.

Mr. Giles, a founding member of the organization We Need Diverse Books, said he was immediately intrigued when Mr. Alexander sent him a text message asking if he had any novels in the works. “The imprint is going to be groundbreaking because Kwame is groundbreaking,” Mr. Giles said. “He’s like the Willy Wonka of children’s publishing.”

With his pivot to publishing, Mr. Alexander is joining a small but influential group of children’s book authors who have launched their own imprints and are helping to reshape children’s literature. The prolific best-seller James Patterson created a kids’ book imprint, [Jimmy Patterson](#), with Little, Brown & Company in 2015, and has

since released 48 books, and sold more than seven million copies. In 2016, the author and artist Christopher Myers founded his imprint, Make Me a World, with Random House Children's Books, in part to address the lack of racial and cultural diversity in children's publishing. Rick Riordan, the author of the Percy Jackson series, recently started an imprint with Disney-Hyperion, [Rick Riordan Presents](#), which features middle grade books that draw on mythology from around the world, including Indian, Korean and Mayan myths and folklore, written by emerging writers from underrepresented cultures.

Mr. Alexander sees Versify as a way to leverage his professional connections and marketing savvy to boost the profiles of newer writers.

"I see a lot more publishers being in tune to what's happening outside their communities, and you have a lot more writers of color having an opportunity to get their voices heard," he said. "There is an opportunity with this imprint for me to do that on a mass scale."

Growing up in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and later, Chesapeake, Va., Mr. Alexander was surrounded by books: His father was a college professor, book publisher and Baptist pastor, and his mother worked as a teacher and then a school principal.

Mr. Alexander, who lives in Virginia and is married with two daughters, decided in college that he wanted to be a writer, even though he found little encouragement at first. At Virginia Tech, he studied medicine, but then he took a writing class with the poet Nikki Giovanni, and became determined to be a poet. She gave him a C, but he signed up for more of her classes, he said. (She later became a mentor to him, and recently agreed to write a book of poetry for his new imprint).

After graduating, he gave poetry readings at universities, coffee shops, churches, community centers and any other place that would have him. He sold copies of his self-published poetry collections for around \$10 a piece. He started his own publishing company, the Alexander Publishing Group, and ran the company for 10 years. But he lost money on the venture, and abandoned the company in 2005 to focus on writing.

A few years later, he started working on "The Crossover." When the book came out in 2014, it catapulted him to prominence. He has since published six other children's books — including the best-sellers "Solo" and "Booked," coming-of-age



An audience listens to Kwame Alexander at a recent speaking event in Lafayette, La.  
Edmund D. Fountain for The New York Times

stories that unfold in verse — and his books have collectively sold more than a million copies. Following “The Crossover,” he signed two separate seven figure, multi-book deals, with Houghton Mifflin Harcourt and Blink, a HarperCollins young adult imprint. His next book, “Rebound,” a novel in verse and prequel to “The Crossover,” comes out this spring.

“There are very few authors like him,” said Ellen Archer, president of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt trade publishing. “He reaches reluctant readers and makes them avid readers.”

Tall and energetic, Mr. Alexander is a charismatic performer who often breaks into spontaneous poetry when addressing crowds. He seems to have an almost hypnotic command over audiences, whether he’s speaking to squirmy first graders, high school seniors or a room full of publishing executives. In the last couple of years, he’s visited more than 300 schools around the country, sometimes startling

students who had written him fan letters with surprise visits in front of their lockers. He occasionally visits juvenile detention centers and leads poetry workshops.

In December, Mr. Alexander spoke to a group of middle school students at Unity Preparatory Charter School of Brooklyn. He gave away prizes and recited a short poem he wrote when he was a kid (it was about his mom). He recounted his early struggles to get published, drawing out the tale of his successive rejections in a perfectly timed routine.

“I believe that the nos are a part of life,” he told the students. “Raise your hand if you’ve ever been told no?”

You only need one yes, he told them, as the auditorium erupted into cheers.

*Follow Alexandra Alter on Twitter: [@xanalter](#)*

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